Ronald L. Ruble: From Telephone Lineman to Fine Art Printmaker

Preface

In 2020 the Kenosha Public Museum received the donation of a substantial and important collection of fine art prints from Ronald L. Ruble, a nationally- and internationally-recognized fine art printmaker. The collection includes Ruble’s own work as well as the works of prominent printmakers from around the world. Peggy Gregorski, deputy director of the Kenosha Public Museum, asked me to write this story so that the details can be preserved in their collection. I leaped at the opportunity. I am a freelance writer living in southeast Wisconsin, and like Mr. Ruble, I call Kenosha my hometown.

In normal times I would have met with Mr. Ruble (and his wife, Mary K.) in person. But with the Coronavirus epidemic accelerating in the United States in July 2020, I interviewed him by phone. In advance of my conversations with Mr. Ruble, I gathered background information from the Museum’s exhibits and collections manager, Gina Radandt, and curator of exhibits, Rachel Klees Andersen. Over the last thirteen years, both women have developed not only a business relationship with Mr. Ruble, but an abiding friendship as well. I viewed Mr. Ruble’s works on his website, printrevolutioninamerica.com. I also read two of Mr. Ruble’s books, The Print Renaissance in America: A Revolution, and Dear Alfie, an autobiographical work in which he tells his stories of growing up in Kenosha.

On speakerphone in Brooklyn, Wisconsin, with his wife, Mary, at his side, Mr. Ruble talked about his early life in Kenosha and his art; a remarkable description of how he began to collect his vast print collection; and why the couple made the decision to select the Kenosha Public Museum as the repository of his collection. Readers will discover that Mr. Ruble’s story is truly a “Circle of Life.”

July 2020

Penny Haney

Part 1 - Paint in My Head

Boyhood and Early Influences

It was the time of the Great Depression when Delores Field penned a letter to her sister Jean in Kenosha, Wisconsin, saying she planned to take her two children (four year old Ron Ruble¹ and his six year old brother Bobby) and jump off a St. Louis, Missouri, bridge. Delores had just read a note left by her husband on the kitchen table saying goodbye. He was headed west to California.

In response, Jean (Field) sent money for her sister and two nephews to travel the roughly four hundred miles on a Greyhound bus from St. Louis to Kenosha. Delores had been a Missouri farm girl, but after arriving in Kenosha she worked hard as a waitress at a place called Maywood Restaurant. She worked sixty to seventy hours a week scratching out a living for herself and her two young boys. For a period of time it was necessary to board Ron and his brother at a farm while she saved enough money for the family to be reunited.

¹ Ron Ruble
Later the three did reunite under one roof and lived in a one-room apartment above a small grocery called Fortes near 52nd Street and Sheridan Road. Eventually Delores and Kelly Ruffolo (her boss) married, and the four moved to an apartment above Bernacchi’s Pharmacy at 39th Avenue and 75th Street.

On Saturdays, Delores would give Ron the three-cent bus fare to go to the Kenosha Public Museum (then at 56th Street and 10th Avenue) where seven-year-old Ron could watch free movies. Wending his way past the exhibits to the museum’s basement for the movies, he observed the art. He was “mesmerized” by the Lorado Taft dioramas and other art exhibits. Even if the exhibit was unchanged from the previous week, he was content to look at it all over again.

Ruble specifically recalls the works of Doris White (1924-1995, Wisconsin born, internationally-known watercolorist) and how he was “totally knocked out by her watercolors. I would sit there mesmerized until I was late getting home. At home I didn’t have any materials, but I would dream like I did and paint in my head.”

As a five year old child with the measles, he had amused himself by creating collages, snipping out figures from comic strips of the Lone Ranger, Tonto, and Prince Valiant. Recalling the museum’s exhibits back then, he comments, “The art exhibits reminded me of the Lone Ranger and Tonto and Prince Valiant. And the magic! From [age] five to eighty-four, I’m still making collages! That’s how it all began. The museum [Kenosha Public] was my total, and I mean total, influence to getting me to be an artist. It influenced me that much. I always wanted to be an artist.”

At his side, Mary quietly reminds Ruble of Kenosha artist John Goray’s (1912-2019) influence on his life, and he adds,

He became kind of my mentor later on. He was a professional artist and the first artist I ever knew. He totally took me under his wing and encouraged me. He was one of those angel guys, who if it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be doing what I am doing. I didn’t have a father, so I needed that, too. He’d drop everything if I came around, and we’d have fun together. He was number one.

For first grade, Ruble attended St. James Parochial, and after the family moved to the west side of the city, he attended and graduated from St. Mary’s Parochial. For high school he enrolled at Campion Jesuit in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Campion was a college prep boarding school and a couple of hundred miles west of Kenosha. He stayed at Campion one year, disappointed in the school’s lack of focus on sports.

“Plus it was an all boys’ school,” Mary adds with a “virtual” wink, and their commingled laughter travels across the speakerphone.

He spent his remaining high school years at Kenosha High School, later renamed Mary D. Bradford High School, where he was “back in Red Devil [sports team] heaven.” Ruble was an athlete in track and field and football; he graduated in 1954.
The Family Man and Businessman
Not long after high school graduation he married his high school sweetheart, Carol Ann Severance. In 1955, they moved from Kenosha to Madison, Wisconsin, where Ruble worked as a lineman for the telephone company.

The couple was married for twenty-two years and they had four children together – Ron, Jr., Robin (1956-2016), Rory and Leslie. During those years, Ruble’s business career ascended within the Bell System from lineman to sales and ultimately to division manager with over five hundred people reporting to him.

But business success can sometimes take a toll on marriages.

“I got busy with the corporate world, and my job was exciting, and she was raising four children, working her tail off, and did ninety-nine percent of the work. All I did was provide an income. We drifted apart.” After twenty-two years of marriage, they divorced amicably and remained friends. She passed away in 2019.

Ruble met his second wife, Mary, at the phone company a few years later. They have been married forty-five years and live in the Village of Brooklyn, Wisconsin, about a half hour south of Madison, Wisconsin.

They have many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and when asked how many, he defers to Mary.

“How many grandkids and great-grandkids do we have?”

Mary laughs and responds, and Ruble reports, “We have a few step-great-grandchildren, too, and if you put them all together, there are twenty-five.”

The Bell System came to an end in 1984 through divestiture and restructuring. Ruble explained the company had offered him a “copper parachute,” and he accepted. He was fifty when he retired from Bell, and he declares, “That’s when I became a real artist.”

Part 2 – The Basement Printmaker

Early Artistic Career
When Ruble was about thirty years old, he had painted a watercolor titled City Moonscape, entered it in a Kenosha County Fair competition, and won a grand prize.
“I finally had materials,” referring to his boyhood when he painted in his head. “I whipped that out in about an hour. Everything just fell into place like some things do. And it actually wasn’t bad. It won the grand prize for cryin’ out loud,” he relates with a self-deprecating chuckle.

In fact, Ruble won a grand prize twice at county fairs, “Now I knew that I must be good,” and quickly adds, “I’m just kidding.” More competitions followed, including the Wisconsin State Fair and the Society of American Graphic Artists show in New York.

“It was the biggest and most prestigious society in the country. And that really boosted my ego, of course, and I had trouble walking on the ground.”

He claims he is not a natural born artist, so every evening he would “draw, draw, draw,” working hard at it. Figure 1 shows an example of one of Ruble’s lithographs and his drawing. “Strictly self-taught,” he describes himself as a “basement printmaker” explaining that after returning home from work, he retreated to his basement to create and run prints. He ran prints because he could create multiples of them, and as he explains, “I didn’t have two coins to squeeze together. With four kids growing up, I was trying to make a dollar here and a dollar there.”

Eventually he gained agents around the United States and internationally, and he sold many of his works; he began winning major awards.

“I’m not really too humble, but I try to look at things realistically, and I do okay. I’m my biggest critic. A lot of people say I’m too tough, but I say, ‘no.’ You should just really push yourself to be the best you can be.”

**The Printmaker’s Artistic Evolution**

Ruble is not only a recognized printmaker and author, he also had felt the urge to create three-dimensional. He had always admired pottery, and although he believed he did not have much ability, he worked at it, just as he worked at his drawing. For ten years he created pottery and was recognized nationally for it, but then something changed.
“One day I woke up and said these are nice little pots, but I think I can express myself as an artist better in two-dimensional, so I went back to printmaking.”

This time, though, he did not return to making multiples.

Printmaking is kind of oriented towards good drawing, and even though I wasn’t the greatest draw-er, I tried to take the weakest thing I had and work at it. I continued to do that, and now I’ve developed some unique things that I do—it intrigues me. They’re collages, but they’re different. Almost a cross between a real artistic collage and drawing. Almost like colored photos. I don’t necessarily take the photo, but I can draw fairly photographic now. I’ve developed this lately, and am very pleased and feel that it’s the best stuff I ever did. And it’s mine. I’m really pleased at this point in my life.

Figure 2 below shows an example of one of Ruble’s lithograph/collages. He says it just came to him, and he created it on the spur of the moment.

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2 – Two: 2, 9” x 22-3/4” by Ronald L. Ruble, 2018. Used with the artist’s permission.**

The octogenarian is still hard at work. In 2019 he created a series of thirteen images titled *The North Country*. The series tells a story about Wisconsin’s early settlers “when life was tough and there were a lot of suicides and terrible, terrible things happening. Women going crazy and killing their children.”

And this year (2020) he is creating a second series of thirteen images. “They’re a little tougher.” In what way? His voice is laden with emotion when he says, “In the way that I know that I’m limited in my life, and I’m trying to get that feeling down. I’m not sad; I’ve done everything that I wanted. I’ve led a charmed life, so I’m very happy.”

Referring to this second series, Ruble says,

They’re a little edgy. But they’re me and nobody else. They’re just flowing, just coming out of me, and I’m letting them do whatever they want. I never let myself
do that. There was always in a small way some ulterior motive to what you draw or make. But this was coming from my gut, and I don’t need anything except this expression at this point. So I’m letting it go. But I finally feel what an artist can do by not looking at other things or doing other people’s stuff. I’m doing my stuff. This is me.

The Non-Traditionalist
And in this, the twenty-first century, the artist does not rely solely on the traditional printmaking methods.

I switched to digital because it’s faster. I can draw now to make it look very good, but to draw a good figure, it might take me two to six months. All of the sudden it dawned on me—am I crazy? I’m just copying - more or less - a photograph and making a little change here or there. Now I take a photograph or a drawing, feed it into the computer, spit it out. I get a black and white, I manipulate it, I put in color, and I rephotograph it.

I do the same thing over and over maybe five different times until I get the soft subtle depth that you can only get with this digital. Because it looks like a photo and yet there is drawing in there. Every time I change it, there’s more drawing in it. It’s the subtlety of the digital. I look at digital, though, not as end in itself, but as a tool to add to my toolbox. When I saw this digital tool, I saw immediately what I could do with it. I didn’t change entirely to digital, but I added to it with the other tools and now I’ve really melded them together. And you can’t tell one from the other. It’s so subtle and intriguing.

Figure 3 on page 7 is an example of Ruble’s digital printmaking.
Ruble was not apprehensive to make a move into digital printmaking. “I’ve never been too afraid of change, so I’ll change at the drop of a hat if I can see how to make my image better. I don’t care about anything except the final image.”

He elaborates, “The pencil, the paper, digital is only the media you use to arrive at a piece of art. It’s a craft and all that stuff is your craftsmanship. Hopefully you can use the craftsmanship to see that gut feeling. The one person in a billion because you’re you. Nobody’s like you. And if you can get that out of you and make one piece of you—you’re an artist. We all are. I believe that art is an expression of the human spirit, and that’s all. It’s not a commodity. It’s not a technique. It’s not a craft. It’s us. It’s that one thing in you.”

Many traditionalist printmakers shun the use of digital tools, preferring to stay “old school” and using complex processes and costly lithograph presses, but not Ruble.

It took me years and years to draw a picture halfway decent, so I hate to give it up and use a photograph, but you got to understand it’s just a tool, it has nothing to do with the final work of art. Everybody tries to make art a commodity, and that’s the worst thing that ever happened. It’s not a product—it’s you. The last few years I truly felt in my mind what art is all about. I was able to divorce myself from the commodity to a high degree, and now I’m doing the best things I’ve ever done.

Looking Ahead
As to printmaking in the next century, Ruble expounds,

Graphics is the future. Everything over the last twenty years has been growth in graphics, and the commercial market is driving it. That’s why you have digital – because it’s cheaper, faster and can get it out there right away. People are here to make money and graphics is money, sad to say, and we accept it because we can’t help it. We can’t duck; we can’t get out of the way. All the old technologies are going away because they’re too expensive. You’ve got the offset lithograph that costs a lot of money. Photography costs a lot of money. Look at what they did to photography with digital, I mean click, click, click and everyone’s a master.

There’s a group on Facebook I’ve been following. Seven people getting up every morning at sunrise and taking pictures of the sun coming up over Eichelman Park [Kenosha]. I’m telling you, these photographs are gorgeous, and they’re just
people, but they’re artists. I see them getting better. They can’t even hardly help it. But they’re doing graphics and showing graphics and everyone is lining up looking at them, and seeing them, and feeling them.

Part 3 – The Art Collector

Ruble frequently credits the people along the way who helped him in his artistic career and his collection. “I didn’t do it alone, not even close.”

“Building a substantial collection of art was not my initial intent,” he said about the beginnings of his collecting passion over fifty years ago. As he wrote in The Print Renaissance in America: A Revolution,

My habit started innocently enough, when I did a favor for a friend who owned a frame shop in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Imagine my excitement when he gave me a Leonard Baskin [1922-2000] etching, titled “Barlach”, as a thank you gift. At the time I had no knowledge of the artist or the medium, but it was an elegant and stunning image, and I was impressed that it was hand signed by the artist.\(^2\)

From his home in Brooklyn, he continues,

Then I had a thought. I started entering bigger shows and getting to know not the person, but the artist’s work of all the good guys around the country who I was starting to exhibit with. I went where angels fear to tread, and I wrote twenty-five letters to twenty-five different artists, including a few Madison artists and Wisconsin artists. I had won some nice prizes at the time, and I had a couple nice pieces. I asked if they would like to trade. I was almost shaking as I sealed the envelopes. I was trying to talk to these big wheels. I was scared to death. Lo and behold I had twelve answers. The artists said yes, they recognized my things from the shows, they thought they were wonderful, a couple even called a couple of pieces “classics”. So I was flying high, and I got twelve new prints in return.

I was excited, so I kept doing that on a periodic basis. I never met these people, but with more than half of them, we’re friends and I keep in constant contact with them. Now I have three or four of these guys who have sent me almost everything they’ve got. And I’m turning around and donating them to Kenosha [Kenosha Public Museum]. One artist just sent me fifteen beautiful, awesome prints. He’s the best engraver in the country, and he sent me fifteen! And I turned around and am giving them to Kenosha. Artists are a generous group of people, beautiful people.

Ruble’s voice is pensive when he comments, “So many artists stepped forward and gave me stuff for the book. Just gave it to me! You know why? Because they wanted my dream to come true.”

Ruble confirms that his dream has come true. He says that in his life he has accomplished three major things: He finally became an artist,\(^3\) he has written a book on art,\(^4\) and has made many friends.
It may be difficult to fathom how Ruble managed to collect such an important and prodigious collection. In *The Print Renaissance in America: A Revolution*, he described how he amassed and focused his collection following his initial trades with artists.

Over time, I realized the immensity of the printmaking world, and the impossibility of having it all. My collection was also varied in its content, having works by Piranesi and Pierre Bonnard, as well as many modern foreign printmakers. I had a collection of prints, but there was no direction . . . I would have to develop a theme, and a more centered approach . . . I was living in the midst of a period of time that was actually unique in art history, the revival of printmaking. It was the *Print Renaissance*, and it was in fully play all around me, involving a growing number of American printmakers. I was also directly involved in it. What could be more appropriate?\(^5\)

**Part 4 - Donation of His Collection to the Kenosha Public Museum**

Ruble has donated over nine hundred prints to the Kenosha Public Museum since his first 2007 exhibit *Coming Home...A Life’s Journey: Ron Ruble Retrospective* and the 2010 exhibit *The Printmaking Revolution in America and the Wisconsin Presence*. He donated the balance of his collection to the Museum in 2020. He credits Mary as having been the greatest influence upon him to make the significant donation.

Being a collector, it’s hard to let go. Because for every piece of art I’ve ever had there’s a story behind it. And the story is sometimes more powerful than the image itself. She [Mary] spent a couple of years convincing me to do something good with them [collection]. Mary convinced me that they would have perpetual care and how much good these could do over the next one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years. She finally convinced me, and it still hurts [to give up his collection], but I’m able to do it now. She convinced me it’s the perfect thing to do for Kenosha and for us. I finally figured out what a beautiful way to give back to what Kenosha gave to me. That’s powerful stuff.

In honor and recognition of the artist and Mary, the Museum is renaming the South Gallery to The Ronald L. and Mary K. Ruble Gallery. A private reception to dedicate the gallery is planned August 22, 2020. The exhibit *Masters of Their Era – Prints from the Ronald L. and Mary K. Ruble Collection* runs August 2020 – February 2021.

When asked how it feels to have the Museum’s gallery renamed in their honor, Ruble says, “I wouldn’t have dreamed of such a thing. I’m so, so, so proud. And so is Mary. We didn’t want anything in return, and yet they gave us this great honor. I finally figured out a way to give back to Kenosha what Kenosha gave to me. I was a little kid who went there for free movies, and I ended up with a career and a gallery named for us.
“Some little kid is going to walk in there and see what I was able to do because somebody was good to me, and they will become an artist and carry it on. I know that’s going to happen.”

Notes

1. Ronald Ruble was born in St. Louis, Missouri, August 15, 1935.
3. “Ruble’s work has been included in over 90 national and international juried art exhibitions and has been the recipient of 42 major awards. His work is included in more than 60 museum and university art collections.” Print Renaissance, Ruble (USA: Global Authors, 2010), 109.
4. Ruble has written three books: Ronald Ruble, The Print Renaissance in America: A Revolution (USA: Global Authors, 2015); We Were Heroes Then (USA: Global Authors, 2010); Dear Alfie (USA Global Authors, 2006).
5. Ruble, Print Renaissance, 107.